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SKINKS

American Five-lined Skink

Plestiodon fasciatus

Plestiodon fasciatus is a slender, glossy-scaled skink from woodland and woodland edges in eastern North America. It grows to 13-21 cm, the young are black with five pale stripes and a bright blue tail, and the male gets a red head in the breeding season. It feeds on insects and spiders, needs sun and a cold winter rest, and the female guards her eggs.

Family: Scincidae Former name: *Eumeces fasciatus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**13-21 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**4-6 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Temperate woodland and meadow**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**90 × 45 × 45 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**24-30 °C**
Basking spot	**34-38 °C**
Temperature, night	**15-20 °C**
Humidity	**60-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 2
Winter rest	**5-10 °C** 8-16 weeks
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**In pairs or one male with several females**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**21-36 months**
Clutch size	**5-18 eggs**
Clutches per year	**1**
Incubation	**22-32 days** at 27-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Not listed**
EU annex	**Not listed**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Plestiodon fasciatus is a medium-sized, slender skink with glossy, smooth scales and small legs. Adults are 13-21 cm in total, and most of the length is tail. The body measures at most about 9 cm from snout to vent. The species name *fasciatus* is Latin and means banded.

The young are black with five narrow, white to cream stripes and a bright blue tail. The blue is found only on the tail and does not extend further forward than the vent. The tail turns grey-brown when the animal is about 5 cm from snout to vent. The female keeps the stripes for life on a dark brown to brown-grey background. The male loses the stripes with age, and old males are uniformly olive-brown. In the breeding season the male's snout and jaws turn orange to red; the colour is strongest during the short breeding season of about two weeks. The male's head is also broader than the female's.

The species is often confused with *Plestiodon inexpectatus* and *Plestiodon laticeps*. *P. laticeps* is larger and grows to more than 8 cm from snout to vent, and its blue tail fades only at a larger size. There are no recognised subspecies, but genetic studies suggest that the species may include one or more cryptic species.

The tail can be shed when danger threatens and regrows, but does not regain its original colour. In the wild the animals live up to about six years, but most die young. Lifespan in captivity is not documented. The animal is quick and shy and is an animal for observation, not for handling.

Distribution and habitat

Plestiodon fasciatus lives in the eastern United States and south-eastern Canada. It occurs from southern Ontario and the north-eastern states through the Appalachians and the central plains to eastern Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas and south to northern Florida. To the west it reaches Nebraska and Iowa.

In Canada the populations are small and isolated.

> **Native range:** United States and Canada.

HABITAT

Plestiodon fasciatus lives in deciduous and mixed woodland, at woodland edges, in clearings and around buildings in or near woodland. It prefers moister habitats than other species in the genus and is found in deciduous woodland, floodplain forest, swamp forest and dry pine woodland. The animals stay under boards, logs and debris, but preferably among them and not directly on the ground. They also often climb and readily escape up trees, especially in open woodland with dead standing trees, and they enter water without hesitation, where they can hide under objects.

The animals are active from March-April to October and can be seen in winter on unusually warm days. Young animals emerge from the winter rest earlier and enter it later than adults. The winter quarters are deep crevices in walls and the decayed interior of large logs and stumps. The animals often lie together. The males fight over the females in the breeding season, in May, and follow the females' scent trails. The females lay one clutch in June-July in decayed, damp wood or under rocks, and the eggs hatch in July-August. The animals have no fixed territories, but move within a small, familiar area. Given the choice, the animals select a body temperature of 28-36 °C, and they briefly tolerate up to 42 °C.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

There is little documented knowledge about keeping *Plestiodon fasciatus* in captivity. The recommendations here are based on the species' habitat, preferred temperature and biology. The enclosure should imitate a damp deciduous woodland with a basking spot at one end.

A male and a female need at least 90 × 45 × 45 cm (length × width × height). With more females a larger floor area is needed, and only one male is kept with them, because males fight. The substrate is a mixture of forest soil, leaf litter and peat, 8-10 cm deep, so that the animal can dig and hide. Lay pieces of bark, rotting wood, stones and cork in several layers, so that there are many crevices to hide in, and a piece of rotten, damp wood for egg-laying. Climbing branches and cork-covered walls are used, because the species often climbs. Plant robust shade plants if you like. The lid must be secure, because the animals are quick and escape through small gaps.

Keep the animals apart from *Plestiodon laticeps* and other larger skinks, which eat smaller animals.

Read more: Heat and temperature

TEMPERATURE

Plestiodon fasciatus chooses its own temperature between 28 and 36 °C and briefly tolerates up to 42 °C. The daytime temperature in the enclosure should be 24-30 °C, and the basking spot 34-38 °C. Use a halogen spot over a flat stone, and place hiding places on both sides of the gradient. At night the temperature should fall to 15-20 °C.

In the wild the animals lie in winter rest for about five to six months. They survive short periods of frost, but not sustained frost. The temperature and duration of the rest in captivity are not documented. An estimate of 5-10 °C for 8-16 weeks is based on the climate of the habitat. Only healthy, well-fed animals are given a winter rest, and their gut must be empty first,

so the last meal is given three weeks before cooling. Keep the box slightly damp and frost-free, and check the animals regularly.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Plestiodon fasciatus prefers moister habitats than most other species in the genus, does not tolerate overly dry conditions and always lives near permanent water. The humidity in the enclosure should be 60-80 %; the figure is an estimate based on the habitat. The substrate is kept slightly damp in one half and dry in the other, so that the animal can choose. Mist the enclosure lightly every morning, and keep a damp hiding place with moss or rotten wood.

A shallow water dish is always available, and the water is changed daily. The animals enter water willingly. Make sure the substrate never stands in water and that there is good ventilation, so that mould and bacteria do not take hold.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Plestiodon fasciatus is diurnal and basks, especially in the morning. The species lives at woodland edges and in clearings and needs strong light and UVB. Over the basking spot use T5-HO tubes with UVB at about Ferguson zone 2, so that light, heat and UVB cover the same area. The zone is an estimate based on the species' way of life. Measure with a UV meter, and replace the tubes according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Daylength follows the season: about 14 hours in summer, falling to 8-10 hours in autumn, so that the animal falls into rhythm with the winter rest. The spot over the basking area is on for 6-8 hours in the middle of the day.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Plestiodon fasciatus is purely carnivorous and lives on arthropods. In the wild the food consists mainly of spiders, grasshoppers, crickets, cockroaches, beetles and their larvae, flies, caterpillars, woodlice, earthworms and small snails, and less often of small vertebrates such as smaller lizards. The animal also eats its own shed skin.

In the enclosure give crickets, grasshoppers, waxworms, cockroaches, mealworms and earthworms in sizes the animal can swallow whole. The feeder insects must be well fed before they are given, and are dusted with calcium and a vitamin supplement with D3. Adults are fed every other day in the active season, young animals daily. Before the winter rest the animals are fattened up, and females need plenty of food after hatching, because they lose a lot of weight while tending the eggs.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Plestiodon fasciatus is quick and shy and hides under bark and stones when disturbed. The animal is not territorial, but the males fight in the breeding season: they first show the head from the side and then bite each other on the head and throw the opponent about. Therefore keep only one male with one or two females. The females can stay together, and in the wild they often share nests.

Adults eat young animals, so the young must be kept separately. The tail is shed under stress or when held, so the animal should not be grabbed. Only the female guards the eggs.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male has a broader and stronger head than the female, and the head turns orange to red in the breeding season. Old males lose the stripes and are uniformly olive-brown, while the female keeps them. The body is roughly equally long in both sexes, so size says nothing about sex. Young animals cannot be sexed.

The animals mature in their second spring, at about 21 months of age and 5-6 cm from snout to vent. In cooler regions it can take up to three years. A few animals reach breeding size in their first summer, but only have young in their second year. Only put healthy, fully grown animals to breed.

MATING

Mating follows the winter rest, in the wild in May. The male's colours appear after waking and are strongest during the breeding season of about two weeks. He finds the female by following her scent trail, approaches her from the side and grips her by the neck with his jaws. Copulation itself lasts 4-8 minutes.

Place one male and one or two females together after the winter rest, and separate them if the female gets bite wounds.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays one clutch a year, in June-July, at least a month after mating. A clutch holds 5-18 eggs, most often 7-10. She digs a nest chamber in damp, partly decayed wood, under a flat stone or bark, and chooses places where the ground is damper than the surroundings. Several females may nest in the same log.

The eggs are about 13 × 9 mm and weigh 0.5-0.8 g, with a thin shell that is easily punctured. The female stays with the eggs until they hatch. She lies beside them, on top of them or coiled around them, and covers them more when the ground is dry. She turns them, rolls eggs that have left the nest back into it and eats eggs that have begun to rot. She loses a lot of weight while brooding, and her tail is noticeably thinner afterwards.

INCUBATION

The eggs can stay with the female in the enclosure, where she tends them. If they are removed, they are placed without being turned in damp vermiculite (vermiculite and water 1:1 by weight) in a closed container with small air holes. The eggs must neither dry out nor stand in water.

Incubate the eggs at 27-30 °C. At 30 °C they hatch after about 22 days, and at lower temperatures it takes longer, up to about a month. In cooler natural nests it takes 24-55 days. A whole clutch usually hatches within a day, and the young open the shell with the egg tooth. Remove eggs that smell or go mouldy.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are 5-6 cm in total and 23-27 mm from snout to vent and have a bright blue tail. They are offered food from the first days: springtails, fruit flies, aphids and small crickets, dusted with calcium. Keep them in an enclosure with substrate, hiding places, a shallow water dish and the same temperatures as the adults. Separate them from adults, because adults eat them.

The young grow quickly in the first year and are up to about 5 cm from snout to vent by the first winter. Weak young are kept warm and awake during the first winter.

Health and common mistakes

The species is hardy, but the most common problems are:

- Metabolic bone disease from a lack of UVB and calcium. Provide UVB, and dust the food.
- Dried-out eggs if the nest is too dry. Keep it slightly damp.
- Skin problems and mould if the substrate is constantly wet. Keep a dry zone.
- Loss of the tail through stress or fights. It only partly regrows.
- Internal parasites. New animals are quarantined, and a faecal sample is taken before the winter rest.
- Poor winter rest in sick or thin animals. Keep them awake and fed.
- Females that lose a great deal of weight while tending the eggs. Give plenty of food afterwards.

A healthy animal has clear eyes, a plump tail and a good appetite. See a vet with reptile experience if the animal does not eat, loses weight or is lethargic.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

Always ask someone who knows

This guide is a good place to start, but it cannot replace experience. Animals differ, and much of what matters most is learned from people who have kept the species for years. Talk to a breeder, an experienced keeper or a vet who knows reptiles and amphibians before you get the animal - and again if anything looks wrong.

The full guide with map and updates: herpy.org/en/skinks/plestiodon-fasciatus